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Former Tongass Ranger boat has strong Ketchikan roots

By Scott Bowlen / Ketchikan Daily News Fairbanks Daily News-Miner Sep 3, 2012



The former Forest Service ranger boat Ranger 9, now called Gravina, after where it was built on Gravina Island across from downtown Ketchikan, motors out of Thomas Basin boat harbor July 22, 2012 in Ketchikan, Alaska. Leaning out of the wheelhouse is skipper Mark Lundsten. Author Brad Matsen stands behind the wheelhouse and boat builder Joe Bakketun, stands on the stern. (AP Photo/Hall Anderson, Ketchikan Daily News)

Hall Anderson

KETCHIKAN, Alaska - In boat-savvy Ketchikan, it takes something special to turn heads.

When the Gravina passes by, heads swivel.

Many local onlookers can recognize the classic lines of this mid-century wooden work boat and its deep connection to Ketchikan and the waterways of the Alexander Archipelago.

Built in 1930 at the U.S. Forest Marine Station on Gravina Island's Clam Cove, the 47-foot vessel was launched as the Ranger 9 and served in the Forest Service fleet that operated in the Tongass and Chugach national forests.

It eventually was sold into private ownership and changed hands over time until the early 2000s, when it was bought by former halibut schooner skipper Mark Lundsten of Anacortes, Wash.

Lundsten worked over a four-year period to renovate the boat, striving to "maintain the integrity of what it was" while updating the vessel for contemporary use

"The idea with the whole boat is to try to make it functional and modern, but to have it reflect the original equipment," Lundsten said recently while visiting Ketchikan aboard the Gravina. "And it's very much is original equipment - the hull and the superstructure are all basically as it was built. The same stuff."

That makes the Gravina instantly identifiable as a Tongass ranger boat

"People in Ketchikan have recognized it for a long time," Lundsten said. "They come around: 'Hey, this is one of the ranger boats, which one is it?' Ranger 9. ... It's kind of cool to bring it back here. It kind of belongs here."

It certainly has a number of Ketchikan connections.

But first, some general history.

In 1908, the Forest Service, facing the challenge of operating in a unique coastal environment, began to build and use mid-sized ranger boats for transporting its crews, material and floating camps throughout the region.

"They were strong boats, specially designed for strength and seaworthiness and the ability to respond to any emergency in southeastern Alaska," according to a Tongass National Forest history of the ranger boats

The "Tongass Navy" fleet reached its peak size of 11 boats in 1928 before declining with the advent of floatplanes and helicopters, according to the agency.

Five of the ranger boats, Rangers 6-10, were built at the Gravina Island Marine Station.

The marine station had been built next to the homestead property of Antone Stensland, whose eldest son, Walter Stensland, became a shipwright there.

As such, Walt Stensland was a builder of the Ranger 9.

The Ranger 9's original skipper was one of Walt's brothers, Lloyd Stensland, according to family friend Bill Stewart. Lloyd Stensland continued to operate the boat after it was transferred to Ketchikan.

By 1959, the Ranger 9 was one of four ranger boats being held in reserve status according to the Forest Service. Only three ranger boats remained in service by 1970, and all but one of the original wooden ranger boats - the Chugach - now are retired.

The Ranger 9 eventually wound up in the Pacific Northwest under the name of "Aqua Gem."

During the 1970s, Lundsten left graduate school and was working as a welder at the Fishing Vessel Owners Marine Ways in Seattle.

One of the shipwrights there was a guy named George Stensland, the youngest brother of Walt and Lloyd Stensland.

"George was the master," recalls Lundsten, who said would seek out Stensland to help lay out a template "if I had some problems with finding a fair curve or whatever."

George Stensland also was a mentor to a couple of young shipwrights at the yard - Joe Bakketun and John Thomas.

Among the clientele at the marine ways were classic wooden halibut schooners that fish off the coast of Alaska.

Becoming interested in fishing, Lundsten worked as a crewman aboard a halibut schooner for six years while continuing to work at the marine ways during the off seasons.

In 1984, Lundsten bought his own boat, the 70-foot wooden halibut schooner Masonic that had been built in 1930. Lundsten fished with the Masonic until selling it 2002.

He still owned the halibut schooner when he took it out for a non-fishing trip with family and friends.

"My wife said, 'Gee this is really cool. We should just keep the boat,'" Lundsten said. "And I said I'm not going to keep a 70-foot halibut schooner. That's way too much to handle."

One of his guests spoke up, saying, "Well, I've got just the boat for you."

That guest was Joe Bakketun.

Bakketun and John Thomas had formed the Bakketun & Thomas Boat Co. during the 1980s, focusing on wooden boat construction and repair at their Salmon Bay location in Seattle.

They'd acquired a boat whose former owner had leased moorage space at their yard. The boat's name was Aqua Gem.

Lundsten went to see the vessel.

"It's a good looking boat - it's for what I look for in a boat," Lundsten said. "It's well engineered, and it has ... a great shape, great look, and it was solidly built."

Although some of the boat's wood had gone a bit soft here and there, the vessel wasn't in nearly as bad of shape as it could have been, said Lundsten.

After selling the Masonic, Lundsten bought the Aqua Gem/Ranger 9.

He spent the first year cleaning it up, and working on design issues, talking with Bakketun and Thomas about the possibilities for updating the vessel.

"The boat was gutted," he said. "I took the engine out. Everything but the (fuel) tanks and the shaft, and the remnants of those two old (aft and engine room) bulkheads were gone. ... You could stand at the stern and look all the way through the boat."

He found that the boat's fir timbers and oak frames were in decent shape

"I don't think we replaced any ribs, but we sistered a few," he said. "We repaired and replaced some stuff here and there. Put on a plywood deck."

Some of the hull planking also was replaced.

The renovation work began in earnest in about 2003. Lundsten handled the engineering, general labor, demolition and wire-running work, with Bakketun, Thomas and their crew taking care of the fine woodworking and other aspects of the project.

The project took about four years. Lundsten estimates he spent about two years of that period working full time on the boat.

As the new engine and reduction gear weighed about 5,000 pounds less than the original Atlas engine, Lundsten placed about 4,000 pounds of lead all the way down the keel.

"We took pretty close to the same amount of weight - we carry more fuel now - and put it even lower in the boat, so the boat is really stable in the water," Lundsten said.

The boat has an aft cabin and galley. The wheelhouse and another cabin are forward. It can sleep six; seven if someone stretches out in the wheelhouse.

Lundsten renovated the engine room that's located between the aft and forward sections so people can walk through the engine room comfortably.

The new John Deere 6068 engine is covered by a heat shield and sound proofing ("you can hardly hear it when it runs"), and the engine room space now has a head and shower compartments while still possessing ample room to move through the space.

Behind a deceptively old-school door in the boat's full galley is a new refrigeration system that can freeze and store fish.

"We built that to make it look like it was made for the boat, of course," Lundsten said. "We can pack about 150 pounds of fillets down there."

The vessel has full hydraulics in addition to a central heating unit that also supplies hot water and an ingenious system that keeps fresh air flowing through the various voids on the boat "so it doesn't smell musty and moldy and mildewy."

The exterior of the house is western red cedar, framed with Douglas-fir. The windows are oak.

Lundsten has kept the boat's original helm, moving it to the starboard side a bit to accommodate access to the forward cabin from the wheelhouse.

The wheelhouse has a current suite of navigation electronics.

"Fortunately we have modern electronics, which are even more compact now," he said.

Perched the back deck of the boat is a troller-style fishing station. Lundsten still enjoys fishing, and is intent on learning the finer points of chasing salmon.

"I'm trying to figure out trolling for salmon, which I never did commercially," he said. "That's like trying to learn to play the violin. These professional salmon trollers, that's a fine art. I'll spend the rest of my life just trying to get competent at that."

Lundsten brought the boat up from Anacortes in July for a quick sport fishing trip in the Ketchikan area .

It was the fourth time that he'd brought the boat, now named Gravina after the island of its origin, back to its former home territory.

The first trip up was in 2007. That's when Lundsten met Bill Stewart of Ketchikan, who had grown up at Clam Cove and is well acquainted with the Stensland family.

"I was down in Thomas Basin and I saw the Ranger 9 moored in there, all spiffed and shined and I

recognized it to be one of the ranger boats, even though I'd never seen one before, just in photographs," Stewart said.

After introducing himself to the Lundstens, Stewart told them about Walter Stensland's role in building the boat, and of Lloyd Stensland's role in running the boat.

Lundsten said he asked whether the brothers were related to a George Stensland. And as it turned out, the George Stensland that Lundsten worked with years earlier in Seattle was the youngest brother of Walt and Lloyd.

"So, the boat has basically stayed tethered to the Stensland family, one way or another, all of these years," Lundsten said.

Lloyd Stensland was able to visit the Gravina on its next visit to Ketchikan.

"It was pretty neat that the original helm that Lloyd had put lots and lots of hours on was still in the wheelhouse," said Stewart, who photographed Stensland and Lundsten standing side-by-side on the float next to the boat.

"That was meaningful to me, to have the first and original skipper and the current skipper (together)," Stewart said.

Lloyd Stensland died in 2009 at the age of 90.

Lundsten said he enjoyed discovering the connections involving the Stenslands back then. On the current visit, Joe Bakketun was aboard the Gravina as it motored past Clam Cove.

"Joe's come up and we're both driving past Clam Cove here, past the old Stensland place," Lundsten said. "It's kind of cool. ... This boat is like, it's just kind of a weird, small-world story."

Lundsten has used the Gravina for research charters involving the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and Audubon Society, but he's not sure how that type of charter market will develop in the future.

Meanwhile, Lundsten has become involved in filmmaking, and now is working on a second film to follow his short fiction movie ("So This Priest Walks Into A Bar") that appeared at film festivals earlier this year.

He said the best part of owning a boat like the Gravina is it keeps him in touch with something he was involved with for decades.

"I'm still doing what I invested 30 years of life doing before I got this (boat)," Lundsten said. "I still have got my finger on boats and fishing, which I chose not to do any more as a profession, but I do it a little bit and hope I can sustain it. But now I make movies, and that's even riskier than fishing, financially.

"This is a part-time gig that's sort of like the remnant of what I used to do, and it's really satisfying," he said.
